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Sex, Gender, and Femininity: Crucial Aspects in Angela Carter's The Magic Toyshop

by Marley Coody

The 1960s was an interesting era full of social reforms including major changes for women. This era included the “second wave” of feminism: more equal rights for all. Authors during this time used these reformative ideals in their texts and Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* is one such example. Carter attempts to destabilize patriarchal power, albeit at times unsuccessfully, in the course of the novel; however, that does not mean she is unsuccessful the entire time. The novel shows a young woman growing up and questioning where she stands in the world. It is a coming-of-age tale, also calling into question some stereotypical roles of women in the 1960s while using the fairytale archetype to reinforce gender in the novel.

Feminism (and by extension a feminist reading) is, according to Rob Pope, “a politically motivated movement dedicated to personal and social change. Feminists challenge the traditional power of men (patriarchy) and revalue and celebrate the roles of women”. By applying a feminist view to body of text, certain discourses and ideals are illuminated. Sex and gender discourses are explored through the course of the novel, as is the idea of patriarchal control. Both patriarchy and sex/gender go hand in hand. Patriarchy is an idea that springs forth from the socially constructed roles of what a man is supposed

to be because of his gender. These are often reinforced by gender which is always a socially constructed idea.

Take for example what was socially thought and accepted as “feminine”. A woman pre 1960s “was expected to follow one path: to marry in her early 20s, start a family quickly, and devote her life to homemaking” (Tavaana). This is what a woman’s gender tells her to do; it is a socially constructed idea that women were expected to conform to. In the early 1960’s, a feminist revival took place: women started to demand equal treatment, more job opportunities, more freedoms. They wanted to be more equal to their husbands. Eventually, women gained their freedoms, forcing societal ideas to evolve, but many men fought those changes and continued to enforce subservient woman in their homes. Melanie is assumed to be growing up in the middle of this world movement and should be considered a product of these feminist ideals. Uncle Phillip then represents the men that fought change and represents the dated ideals of what genders are supposed to be like. But both of these characters also play a vital role in Carter’s attempt at a feminist retelling of classic fairytales.

The narrative is a blend of classic fairytales which have roots in patriarchal ideals and is, in its own way, a coming of age story. Most women in classic fairytales are, for lack of a better word, helpless and submissive. Women, or the princesses of the stories, are controlled by the men and are usually young women themselves, just like Melanie is. Melanie is just about to enter woman hood,

then she must face adversity upon her parent's death, then again as she settles in her new home with family she doesn't know. She must learn to adapt and survive. It is reminiscent of Cinderella; a girl of a higher class or stature is lowered after her father's death to nothing more than a servant by some wicked force and is forcibly kept in that low position. In Melanie's case it is the wicked uncle who keeps her in what he believes to be "a woman's place"; he essentially forces her into a stereotypical box of what women are supposed to be. Melanie is a princess with a likeness to Snow White (fair skin, dark hair, rosy cheeks), a classic damsel in distress. She has her white knight, Finn, and the evil king/dragon/mythical force, Uncle Phillip.

The main characters of the novel are important. She is a young lady just on the cusp of womanhood. She is beginning to explore her sexuality. The book opens with Melanie "exploring" herself. She is growing into a woman and is attempting to figure out her place in this big, new world of adulthood. Her biological sex is important to the novel. If she was male, the novel would change pretty drastically, especially the key relationship she has with her uncle who regards all women as something beneath him. Even though Uncle Phillip and one of the other men in the house, Finn, don't see eye to eye, Finn has more freedoms than the women of the house do. He isn't silenced like his sister; he isn't forced to do the housework. Phillip treats him sternly instead of abusively. If Melanie was born male, Phillip's views of her would be different. She might be

treated more like Finn; she wouldn't be continually forced into what her uncle tells her to be: a servant girl.

Women's roles in the house included but were not limited to: cooks, housekeepers, children watchers, clerks for the toy shop, and basic housewife chores. A man's role was typically money makers and bread winners, decision makers, and rule enforcers. In their house this is normal even though we see women in the text that are different like Melanie's mom and the lady with the mini. It is natural for this family, but strange to Melanie. And slowly, Melanie realizes that she is doomed to the same oppressed fate as the other women in the house: silenced and controlled by a man. The male dominated power in Phillip's house is clearly seen. Phillip goes so far as to keep the house uneducated, even in current events, by ripping up newspapers so the others in the house can't read it. His wife is silenced because of him. In Melanie's old home, however, power seems more equal between her parents.

Women are not treated as anything more than a servant by the oppressive uncle. Women are always less/submissive to him. In his house, women must wear skirts (a surprise to Melanie) and they not taken seriously if anything else is worn (Carter 62). They have to clean and cook and are not allowed to speak unless spoken to. They have to listen to the male head of house. Men in the novel are freer and seem to get away with more it seems; there are few restrictions placed upon them and face very little consequences for their actions. To Melanie, her uncle seems especially demonic.

Melanie characterizes her uncle with the mythical yet religious term “Mephistopheles mask” (Carter 73). This is key for a few reasons. First is who Mephistopheles is: “[He] achieves tragic grandeur as a fallen angel, torn between satanic pride and dark despair. In the drama Faust... he is cold-hearted, cynical, and witty... At the end of [the] drama, Faust’s soul escapes from Mephistopheles while he is making improper advances to the angels that have come to rescue it” (“Mephistopheles”). By tying Uncle Phillip to Mephistopheles, he takes on those same characteristics: cold-hearted, cynical, witty, and in some cases improper. Melanie perceives him as a somewhat tragic figure. Secondly is the use of the word “mask”. All a mask is a façade; it’s a fake face that disguises who a person truly is. Melanie’s use of the word further diminishes her uncle; if it’s a “Mephistopheles mask” that he wears, then isn’t he even more tragic than he seems? She is making fun of him for trying to be something that he isn’t.

And that is where Melanie, for a brief moment, breaks away from the damsel in distress stereotype she is filling. In that brief moment, her uncle is just a silly little man playing dress up so he feels better about himself. He can’t truly be that person he is trying to be; it doesn’t fit in Melanie’s mind. She brushes him and his mask aside, breaking down for just a moment, the masculine control he has over her. Not only does this call into question her role as a woman, it also breaks apart the fairy tale stereotype; Melanie questions and pities him unlike

every princess in every fairytale. A princess is supposed to be docile and tame, never questioning the king or the prince or the other male figure in her life. She is supposed to accept her fate and never question, let the men have control over her.

While not exactly a fairytale, the tale of Leda and the Swan is steeped in mythology. Zeus, no matter what myth is examined, is known for his infidelity and maltreatment of mortal women and yet is often considered to be the ultimate patriarch. The god is a prime example of patriarchy: he is the head of the house, he controls his women, he has complete dominance over everything the he owns, and he can do whatever it is he pleases without any repercussions. Leda, a beautiful mortal woman, caught Zeus' eye one day. He sneaks down from his god throne in the form of a white swan and rapes Leda. The woman then carries his children; one is Helen who eventually brings about the Trojan War. It is interesting to note that the male swan is one of the only waterfowl that has a sex organ of similar function to a human man, adding to the symbolism of the swan itself. Grecian myth often uses such phallic symbols to show male control, male dominance, over women. Men can do as they please while women just have to oblige and submit. Zeus' rape of Leda is a form of male oppression and is a way to place a claim on Leda. She is nothing more than a possession and something to be conquered.

Carter brings this same symbolism into her book as a useful tool. Melanie takes the role of Leda and Uncle

Phillip creates a swan puppet, and therefore symbolically becomes Zeus, the grand patriarch, himself. The play was supposed to happen just like the myth tells it; Melanie is supposed to let the swan copulate with her. Yet Melanie laughs at her uncle's "grotesque parody of a swan", unlike Leda, and didn't lay with the creature like the original myth told (Carter 165). She broke the "norm" of what women were supposed to do, and the myth, by laughing -- even for a brief moment-- at how grotesque and pitiful the "swan" of Uncle Phillip was (Carter 165). Even though she eventually submits and conforms to what is expected of her, she had a brief moment where her oppressor was nothing more than an ugly, broken thing to laugh at. She destabilized Uncle Phillip's hold on her.

The Magic Toyshop, though not always successful in its attempts to destabilize patriarchy and male gender, does call into question some of society's constructed ideas of gender, sex, and femininity. Carter's use of the classic fairy tale archetype -- a princess who needs saving, a prince to sweep her off her feet, a dark/evil force -- coupled with Melanie's "somewhat" resistance to gender stereotypes succeeds in a few aspects. And while it is sad to see Melanie, who starts off with so much potential as such a strong female character, reduced to nothing more than a little girl repeatedly forced into what her sex is supposed to be, she does try to break free of those constructed feminine roles. If she hadn't been forced to live with her uncle, "the ultimate patriarch," perhaps things would have turned out very differently for Melanie.

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